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August 7

Associated Press (Via ABC News)

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/sludge-colorado-mine-spill-heads-river-nm-32940100>

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Sludge From Colorado Mine Spill Heads Down River to NM

By Kristen Wyatt 3:42AM ET

A plume of orange-ish muck from million-gallon mine waste spill in Colorado was headed down river to New Mexico, prompting communities along the water route to take precautions until the sludge passes.

Officials emphasized that there was no threat to drinking water from the spill. But downstream water agencies were warned to avoid Animas River water until the plume passes, said David Ostrander, director of the EPA's emergency response program in Denver.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said that a cleanup team was working with heavy equipment Wednesday to secure an entrance to the Gold King Mine in southwest Colorado. Workers instead released an estimated 1 million gallons of mine waste into Cement Creek.

"The project was intended to pump and treat the water and reduce metals pollution flowing out of the mine," agency spokesman Rich Mylott said in a statement.

The creek runs into the Animas, which then flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico and joins the Colorado River in Utah.

Officials weren't sure how long it would take the plume to dissipate, Ostrander said. The acidic sludge is made of heavy metal and soil, which could irritate the skin, he said.

The EPA was testing the plume to see which metals were released. Previous contamination from the mine sent iron, aluminum, cadmium, zinc and copper into the water, said Peter Butler, co-coordinator of the Animas River Stakeholders Group.

Earlier Thursday, the EPA said in a statement that the polluted water "was held behind unconsolidated debris near an abandoned mine portal."

As the plume headed toward New Mexico, that state's governor said the EPA waited too long to tell her about the problem.

Gov. Susana Martinez is disturbed by the lack of information provided by the agency to New Mexico's environmental agencies, said Chris Sanchez, a spokesman for the governor. Sanchez said that the state was not told of the spill until almost a full day after it happened.

The plume made its way to Durango on Thursday afternoon, prompting La Plata County health officials to warn rafters and others to avoid the water. The scenic waterway was the backdrop for parts of the movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid" and is popular with summer boaters.

Durango stopped pumping water out of the Animas River on Wednesday to make sure none of the waste could be sucked up into the city reservoir. It also suspended the transfers of raw water to a local golf course and Fort Lewis College. Pet owners were advised to keep dogs and livestock out of the Animas.

"It's really, really ugly," Butch Knowlton, La Plata County's director of emergency preparedness, told The Durango Herald. "Any kind of recreational activity on the river needs to be suspended."

In Farmington, New Mexico, city officials shut down water-supply intake pumps to avoid contamination and advised citizens to stay out of the river until the discoloration has passed. Don Cooper, emergency manager in San Juan County, said people should not panic because the EPA had told the county the spill would not harm people and that the primary pollutants were iron and zinc.

"It's not going to look pretty, but it's not a killer," Cooper told The (Farmington) Daily Times.

The impact on wildlife wasn't clear. There are no fish in the Cement Creek watershed because of longstanding problems with water quality, the Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment said.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife was placing cages containing fish in the Animas River to monitor what happens to them, spokesman Joe Lewandowski said.

"We'll see if those fish survive," Lewandowski said. "We're also monitoring to make sure we don't get infiltration into the hatchery, because that could be a problem."

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife office in suburban Denver did not immediately return a call asking about the spill.

Durango resident Lisa Shaefer said she was near the mine Wednesday when a mine bulwark broke and sent a torrent of water downstream that raised the water level 2 to 3 feet in Cement Creek. The initial wall of water carried rocks and debris and made a roar as it pushed through a culvert, she said.

"What came down was the filthiest yellow mustard water you've ever seen," she told the newspaper.

AUGUST 6

The Denver Post

http://www.denverpost.com/environment/ci_28597473/san-juan-county-spill-highlights-years-colorado-cleanup

San Juan County spill highlights years of Colorado cleanup effort

By Jesse Paul and Bruce Finley August 6 4:23 PM MDT

Environmental officials have been working for years to clear toxic metals and acidic water from Colorado's roughly 22,000 abandoned mines.

The difficulty of that effort was clear Wednesday when the Environmental Protection Agency accidentally released a 1 million-gallon flow of wastewater into a watershed targeted over the past several decades for cleanup.

The Bureau of Land Management had even highlighted the Animas River as one of three environmental priority areas in Colorado affected by mine waste.

The Gold King Mine, the source of the spill, has been eyed for cleanup by environmentalists and federal and state officials since at least 2005.

The EPA was at the site Wednesday with heavy machinery when the spill occurred.

The mine's owners say a plug failed.

"The great news is that modern mining does not allow the release of these waters," said Elizabeth Holley, assistant professor of mining engineering at the Colorado School of Mines. "The bad news is we owe our statehood to mining prior to any environmental regulations."

Until 1977, mining laws in Colorado were minimal, said Ginny Brannon, director of the Colorado Division of Reclamation Mining and Safety.

"Folks could go out and do what they want and walk away from the sites, and this is one of them," Brannon said Thursday. "The main concern from my perspective is continuing to restore and safeguard these old turn-of-the-century mines so that public health and safety and wildlife are protected."

Scientists say Colorado's mineral-rich mountains were shedding toxic metals and acids long before prospectors began digging for profit, but mining can speed up that process.

Holley said Cement Creek, where the Gold King spill happened, was deemed undrinkable in 1876, long before mining had become widespread in the area.

"This is sort of a punctuated release of water, which is unfortunate," Holley said. "But this watershed has had major acid rock drainage for a century."

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The Denver Post

http://www.denverpost.com/environment/ci_28595759/animas-river-contaminated-by-1-million-gallons-contaminated

Animas River fouled by 1 million gallons of contaminated mine water

By Jesse Paul and Bruce Finley August 6 11:27AM MDT

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DURANGO — A spill that sent 1 million gallons of wastewater from an abandoned mine into the Animas River, turning the river orange, set off warnings Thursday that contaminants threaten water quality for those downstream.

The Environmental Protection Agency confirmed it triggered the spill while using heavy machinery to investigate pollutants at the Gold King Mine, north of Silverton.

Health and environmental officials are evaluating the river as it flows through San Juan and La Plata counties. They said the wastewater contained zinc, iron, copper and other heavy metals, prompting the EPA to warn agricultural users to shut off water intakes along the river and law officials to close the river to recreational users.

"There's nothing that can be done to stop the flow of the river," said Joe Lewandowski, a spokesman for Colorado Parks and Wildlife. "We can only wait until the flows slow down. We had a big heavy spring (of rain) here."

Lewandowski said the EPA is testing to determine the river's metal levels and results should be returned by mid-Friday.

Downstream in Durango, hundreds of people gathered along the Animas River to watch as the blue waters turned a thick, radiant orange and yellow just after 8 p.m., nearly 34 hours after the spill started.

"It is a sad day. The fish could be gone," said Daniel Silva, 37, who was fishing near Durango as he does every day after work. "I am safety-orientated. Working in the oil fields, we take measures every day to prevent leakage. Why didn't they? If this kills the fish, what do we do?"

After people told him the contamination was coming, he stopped fishing, and his daughter, who was swimming, got out of the water. And they waited on a bridge.

City officials asked residents to cut back on their water use, and irrigation of city land at Fort Lewis College was stopped.

The La Plata County Sheriff's Office has closed the river from the San Juan County line — including Durango — to New Mexico. Authorities say they will re-evaluate the closure once the EPA tests are confirmed.

The spill was triggered at 10:30 a.m. Wednesday at the mine on the upper portions of Cement Creek, about 55 miles north of Durango. The fluid was being held behind unconsolidated debris near an abandoned mine portal, the EPA says. The agency called the release "unexpected."

Deputy Stephen Lowrance of the San Juan County Sheriff's Office said authorities are keeping people away from the Animas. In Silverton, signs have been posted warning of the danger, and the sheriff's office sent out a public health advisory to stay away from Cement Creek and the Animas River.

"The river looks pretty nasty," Lowrance said. "It doesn't look like water; it just looks like sludge."

The mine is owned by Golden-based San Juan Corp., Durango attorney Nancy Agro said Thursday afternoon. She said the EPA had been operating at the site for years under an access agreement.

"Upon suspending work last year, the EPA backfilled the portal to the mine," Argo said in a statement. "On (Wednesday), while the EPA was removing the backfill from the portal to the Gold King Mine to continue its investigation this year, the plug blew out, releasing contaminated water behind the backfill."

At the time of the spill, EPA responders were at the scene evaluating the toxic materials already leaking into Cement Creek.

"There were several workers at the site at the time of the breach. All were unharmed," the San Juan Basin Health Department said in a news release. "The EPA recommends that recreational users of the Animas River avoid contact with or use of the river until the pulse of mine water passes."

Pet owners have been told to keep their dogs and livestock out of the Animas River until testing is done.

Steve Salka, utilities manager for the city of Durango, said he pulls water from the Animas in the summer to help replenish the Terminal Reservoir. He said that although the city's main water source is the Florida River, the contamination could cause serious problems.

"I want to know what's in it," he said Thursday. "The most important thing is what's in it. I need to know."

"Back in the 1800s, things were used in mining that aren't allowed anymore."

The Animas is a 126-mile river that flows into the San Juan River in Farmington, N.M. The San Juan eventually spills into the Colorado River in Utah.

Todd Hartman, spokesman for the state's Department of Natural Resources, says the mine

operated more than a century ago. It was permitted again in 1986 but never produced in the modern era, he said.

"Its permit was revoked in 2005," he said.

Bill Simon, one of coordinators for the Animas River Stakeholders Group, a water-quality collaborative, said the Gold King Mine was one of several abandoned sites in the area they have been monitoring for decades.

"I think the EPA may have misinterpreted what was going on," Simon said.

Simon said iron oxide in the spill is his biggest concern, especially since it can clog the gills of fish and large invertebrates.

"This river system is somewhat used to pretty poor water quality anyway, so it remains to be seen what effect it's going to be on aquatic life," he said.

The EPA agrees and says because of long-standing water-quality impairment associated with heavy metals in Cement Creek, there are no fish populations. Further, federal officials say, the Animas River historically has been impaired for several miles downstream of Silverton.

It's unknown whether the spill could have any human health impacts, officials say.

"We are monitoring the situation very closely and working with the EPA to get testing results to make sure we minimize any health impacts," said Flannery O'Neil, spokeswoman for the area's health department.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife says it is monitoring wildlife health in the area.

The agency has placed cages with fish in the river to see how they react to the waters. Officials say they should know Friday whether there were any effects.

"This is a significant spill," said Elizabeth Holley, an assistant professor of mining engineering at the Colorado Schools of Mines.

Staff writer Yesenia Robles contributed to this report.

KOAT Albuquerque

<http://www.koat.com/news/farmington-protecting-water-after-dam-breach/34575358>

Orange, sediment-filled water heads to Farmington

August 6 9:49PM MDT

FARMINGTON, N.M. —The Gold King Mine, located above Silverton, Colorado, experienced a breach in their contamination dam Thursday, triggering a large release of water containing sediment.

More than a million gallons of the acidic, orange water filled with iron and other metals will make its way down the Animas River and will be in the Farmington area by tomorrow morning. It'll take at least 24 hours for it to pass through, forcing many people to cancel their plans.

“We were going to go inner tubing but now we can't because we don't want to go in the contaminated water,” said Joanna Vahey, who is visiting from Seattle.

Officials don't want anyone going in, either. People and pets are being asked to stay away from the river until the plume passes.

“I'm scared for my dog because I enjoy walking the park and I'm always leading him to the river so he can drink water,” said Sylvia Garcia, who walks her dog by the river daily.

Right now the city has shut down all of the intake pumps to prevent contamination. But, officials want to assure people in the area that this will not affect drinking water.

They'll also let more water out of the Navajo Reservoir to dilute the contamination.

New Mexico Department of Game and Fish was not aware of this environmental hazard until Action 7 News began asking questions about safety. They tell us they will watch and document what happens to the fish in the river.

"(Gov. Susana Martinez) is very concerned by the massive waste spill ... that (Environmental Protection Agency) officials have admitted to causing. (She) has ordered her agencies to work with local and federal officials to ensure the health and safety of New Mexicans is protected," said Chris Sanchez, a spokesman with Martinez's office. "(She) is disturbed by the lack of information provided by the EPA to our environmental agencies in New Mexico and strongly believes that people in our communities downstream deserve to have all the information about this situation."

KOB

<http://www.kob.com/article/stories/s3872346.shtml#.VcTI6fIViko>

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Animas River closed to public after EPA dumps 1M gallons of waste

By Danielle Todesco KOB eyewitness News 4

SILVERTON, Colo. - A mine waste spill has spewed about a million gallons of orange-colored discharge into a tributary of the Animas River.

The Environmental Protection Agency said it triggered the release while using heavy machinery to investigate pollutants at the Gold King Mine north of Silverton.

The La Plata County Sheriff's Office has closed the river to the public.

"This decision was made in the interest of public health after consultation with the Environmental Protection Agency, the Colorado Department of Health and Environment, San Juan Basin Health Department and representatives of the Southern Ute Indian Tribe," advised Sheriff Sean Smith. "This Order shall remain in effect until it is determined that the river is safe. EPA test results of the Animas River are expected within 24-48 hours, and the Order will be re-evaluated at that time."

Environmental authorities are scrambling to assess damage from the leak, caused when a plug blew at the Gold King Mine near Silverton. Earlier today, officials say that drinking water is not affected and that the spill is not harmful to humans. The primary pollutants are iron and zinc.

The EPA says that about 1 million gallons of mine waste spewed into Cement Creek, which feeds the Animas.

The Colorado Department of Public Health and the Environment says that there are no fish populations in the Cement Creek watershed because of longstanding water quality impairment.

The Bureau of Reclamation will release more water from the Navajo Dam in order to dilute the merger from the Animas into the San Juan River in Farmington, NM.

City of Farmington officials are urging residents to stay out of the river and to keep live stock from drinking the water if discoloration is present.

Farmington's drinking water is unaffected, city officials said.

The New Mexico Governor's office criticized how the EPA released information about the spill. In fact, her office learned about the spill from the Southern Ute Tribe, according to the governor's spokesperson Chris Sanchez.

"The Governor is disturbed by the lack of information provided by the EPA to our environmental agencies in New Mexico and strongly believes that people in our communities downstream deserve to have all the information about this situation," Sanchez said in a statement.

Time Magazine

<http://time.com/3987958/mine-spiller-yellow-river-colorado/>

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A Massive Waste Spill Turned This River in Colorado Orange

By Maya Rhodan August 6

The EPA accidentally caused the spill, reports say

About 1 million gallons of mine waste spilled into a Colorado waterway on Wednesday, turning the water bright orange and prompting officials to warn residents to avoid recreational use of the Animas River.

San Juan County health officials say the Environmental Protection Agency and the state Division of Reclamation, Mining and Safety were investigating another contamination when they “unexpectedly triggered a large release of mine waste water into the upper portions of Cement Creek.” Cement Creek is a tributary of the Animas River.

Residents in parts of Colorado have been urged to cut back on water use and avoid the Animas River until officials are sure the river is free from contamination. According to a release by San Juan County Health Department, the waste contains “high levels of sediment and metals.”

Residents in Durango, Colo. were bracing for the contaminated spillage to reach their area on Thursday afternoon. According to the Durango Herald, the city has stopped watering local parks for at least three days and is urging residents to conserve water until they’re sure their supply

isn't contaminated. The city has also ceased pumping water to a local college and golf course.

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